

Bits & Pieces from a Long Career – William Edward James Bullock (Bill)

I joined the RAF on 6 September 1932 shortly before my 16th birthday, as a Halton Aircraft Apprenticeship, to be trained as an Aircraft Fitter. Training over, I was posted in July 1935 to No 13 Army Coop Squadron at Old Sarum, just north of Salisbury. No 16 AC Squadron, and the School of Army Coop, were also based there. Although we were closely linked to the Army, Sarum kept ship's time. The times for changing the watch were rung on a big ship's bell hanging outside the Guard Room. We even took a bell with us on joint manoeuvres with the Army. This was no doubt a legacy from the days of the Royal Naval Air Service, forerunner of the RFC and RAF.

I was posted to No 4 Flying Training School at Abu Sueir in Egypt in March 1937. This was a 'desert station' 12 miles west of Ismailia, a small town on the west bank of the Suez Canal. During my two and a half years there I enjoyed sand yacht racing, also sailing on Lake Timsah near Ismailia. I did the usual tourist sights – Cairo Museum housing all the King Tutankhamen exhibits etc, and out to Gizeh to see the Pyramids and Sphinx. I could not climb the 450-foot Great Pyramid of Cheops as a sand storm was blowing, but I spent time exploring inside.

With the threat of war looming, No 4 FTS was moved to Iraq to the big RAF Base at Habbaniya, on the west bank of the River Euphrates, 55 miles west of Baghdad. From here I got to see the ruins of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar's Palace etc, and also the remains of The Hanging Gardens, one of the Seven Wonders of the World. For some time the Iraqi Government had been plotting with Germany to get the British out of Iraq and let in the Germans, especially promising them the Habbaniya Base. This would have given Germany access to the oil supplies of Iraq and Iran, a crippling blow to the Allies. Negotiations and threats having failed to move us, the Iraqi Army moved up overnight on the 29 April 1941 and occupied the Plateau, a large 200 foot high ridge of ground less than a mile from the camp. An aerial survey on the 30 April showed that there were 27 field guns and howitzers trained down on the camp, supported by armoured cars and light tanks, assembled there with an estimated 2,000 troops, and more guns could be seen coming from Baghdad.

Meanwhile No 4 FTS had been busily converting its trainer aircraft to act as bombers. A mixture of 28 planes could carry 2x250lb bombs, and another 36 could carry just 8x20lb anti-personnel bombs. As we could only muster 39 pilots from all sources, including the Embassy in Baghdad, we could not deploy the full strength of our bombers at the same time. However we had the support of ten Wellington bombers operating from Shaibah, near Basra, 300 miles south, plus nine Gladiator single-seat fighters loaned to us, with pilots, from Egypt.

Our bombers took to the air at first light and circled the Plateau then, at precisely 5am on 2 May, started bombing. The Iraqi Army immediately started shelling the camp with all their guns, aiming mostly at the hangar area from where a lot of our planes operated. The rest of the planes were on the polo pitch, well dispersed and screened by trees. The RAF suffered heavy casualties that day, losing 22 aircraft and ten pilots, either killed or too seriously injured to fly, as the Iraqi Air Force had also attacked us, with their far superior aircraft.

We stopped our bombing operations at dusk, but the Iraqis kept up their shelling, continuing all through the night. Some estimated that we had a shell every minute from 8pm to 5am next day. So we bombed them heavily every day for the next four days, whilst they bombed and machine-gunned us daily, and continued to shell us day and night. On 6 May the Iraqi Army started to leave

the Plateau, thoroughly beaten and demoralised by our determined efforts, and we also hammered them well in their retreat.

Peace at last, we thought, but NO! There were a few isolated raids from the Iraqi Air Force for the next ten days then, on the 16 May, we were rather shaken to find that we were being attacked by Heinkel 111 bombers and Messerschmitt 110 fighters from the German Luftwaffe. These had sneaked into Iraq and were based at Mosul, an ex-RAF Station, 200 miles north of us. By then we had been loaned two long-range cannon-firing Hurricanes from Egypt, which could cope with the Luftwaffe. Once they followed the Luftwaffe back to Mosul after one of their raids, and caught them defenceless on the ground, destroying at least one and seriously damaging others. The Luftwaffe suffered various other mishaps and by 26 May they no longer posed a serious threat to us. We were at peace at last and the very crucial Battle of Habbaniya had been won, with No 4 FTS having played a very important part in it.

I was about due home, having completed my overseas tour, and eventually sailed from Basra on 17 June 1941, the start of what turned out to be a 17-week sea voyage.

We stopped and changed ships, having several days ashore at Bombay, Mombassa, Durham and Cape Town. At Cape Town I managed a trip to the tip of 3,500-foot Table Mountain, via a mile-long cable railway starting from a level area halfway up the mountain – with spectacular views from the top.

I finally arrived at Liverpool on 11 October 1941 and was posted to Cranwell, then on to Wigsley to a Lancaster Conversion Unit. I was commissioned as an Engineer Officer in July 1943 and after various courses finished up early in November as Technical Adjutant at East Kirkby. Here I was in charge of the Technical Library doing technical returns, reports and miscellaneous paper work. I was in charge of the Station workshops, power plant and propeller bays supporting two Lancaster Squadrons at East Kirkby, two at Spilsby and one at Strubby, with replacement engines and propellers. Units for overhaul or repair came back to me at Kirkby, from where I sent the engines to either Derby or Glasgow and propellers to Bolton, Lancashire for overhaul or repair.

Whilst at Kirkby I attended a Hunt Ball at Revesby Abbey where I met my future wife, Mary Brackenbury, a farmer's daughter from Claxby Pluckacre. Mary was a Leading Firewoman in the Auxiliary Fire Service, on leave from her station at Seaford at the time.

After a year at East Kirkby I was moved to Metheringham as Engineer Office to No 106 Squadron and a hangar full of small single-engined planes used for navigation training – these were no bother at all and I could just leave their Flight Sergeant to deal with them.

No 106 Squadron had received some of No 617 Squadron's 'gutless wonders'. These were Lancasters with their big bomb-doors removed to accommodate Dr Barnes Wallis's 'bouncing bomb' used in the Dam Busters' Raid. They were very suitable for carrying the big sea mines, which No 106 dropped on their mine-laying ops off the German and Dutch coasts.

On 7 January 1945, after two months' hard work, I got my big move – posted to Coningsby as Engineer Officer to Nos 83 and 97 Pathfinder Squadrons and promoted to Flight Lieutenant. My job was to supervise the day-to-day servicing of the 40 odd Lancasters from the two Squadrons and ensure that they had whatever aircraft were needed for their ops. Occasionally the call was for 'maximum effort', which meant they needed all 40 Lancasters. I coped and always supplied what was needed, though it was a bit of a struggle at times. With the end of the war in Europe in May I

was eventually posted to Strubby where 'Tiger Force' was being assembled. This was a Lancaster Wing, scheduled to go to Okinawa, a Japanese island captured by the Americans. From here we were to bomb the Japanese mainland. My job was to supervise the repair of damaged aircraft and collect any which crashed on return from ops. With the surrender of Japan, Tiger Force was not needed, and I was posted at the end of August to a workshop's unit 54 RU (Plant) of the Airfield Construction Service. Their job to service and repair Civil Engineering Equipment, such as bulldozers, excavators and suchlike required for building runways. The Wing was scheduled to go to Singapore four days after I arrived but, fortunately, an Advance Party went from 54 RU (Plant) and I was given 14 days' leave.

Mary and I got a Marriage Licence from the office of the Bishop of Lincoln, allowing us to marry without waiting for Banns to be called in church. We were married in the tiny church at Wilksby on Wednesday 26 September, and on Saturday I was recalled from leave and the following Wednesday I embarked at Liverpool on a ship for Singapore. However we were disembarked at Bombay to wait for the next stage. A week or more later we proceeded on our final stage on the aircraft carrier HMS Venerable. Arriving at Singapore we were accommodated at Seletar, a flying boat base on the east of the island. Our workshop machinery had not arrived and after a couple of months at Seletar we were moved on, eventually settling on Changi Airfield, in tents, very near the temporary runway running out into the sea. This was covered in PSP – large sheets of perforated steel planking – which made a terrible rattling when anything landed or took off. On 3 July 1946 I was sent on a Junior Commander's Course at Kandy, Ceylon, the last stage of the move being ten hours on a Sunderland flying-boat from Penang to Lake Kogala, in the south of Ceylon. Kandy was a small town, high up in the hills; the RAF unit was just a small training school with no aircraft facilities. Whilst I was there the 'Perahera' took place. This was a big religious festival, culminating in a long procession through the streets of Kandy. The procession was made up from the contingents from several temples, each contingent having a large group of priests, led by men cracking long whips, fire-eaters, dancers and a group of elephants. From our vantage point on a hotel balcony I counted over 70 elephants – quite a procession!

The entire procession was led by a sacred elephant from Kandy's own 'Temple of the Tooth' – so called because it housed a casket said to contain a tooth from Buddha. This sacred elephant, reputedly over 100 years old, was not allowed to walk barefoot on the road, so teams of men laid long, wide strips of white silk ahead of him to walk on.

My five-week course over, I moved down to Colombo, capital of Ceylon, and had several interesting days waiting for a ship back to Singapore, five very pleasant days, and much better than the Sunderland.

Arriving back at Changi, I found that with the completion of the runways at Tengah the Airfield Construction Wing was being disbanded. The big majority of the personnel were returning to the UK, and all the plant and transport was being transferred to Air Ministry Works Directorate – the civilian part of the RAF. I was given the job of supervising the rounding up and handing over of all of this equipment. At the same time I was to prepare all the plant and equipment required to lay a permanent runway at Changi – the so-called Changi Runway Project.

At the same time, with the runways at Kai Tak (the RAF station on the Chinese mainland opposite Hong Kong) having been completed, their entire stock of plant and transport was to be shipped down to Singapore and the Construction Wing disbanded.

I was given the job of getting everything collected and somehow hauling it out to Changi, 18 miles away. Our compound at Changi Point was on the sea edge, very near where a fresh water creek joined the sea. At some high tides a group of crocodiles would gather there, probably enjoying the fresh water. They were only 100 yards or so away, about eight or ten of them, up to around 16 feet long as far as we could estimate. They did not really bother us but one man, working in his boat, looked up to see a big crocodile steadily watching him, just a few feet away – he swore that it was as long as his boat – 16 feet and quite capable of taking a bite out of his boat to get at him. We were also paid a visit by a young five-footer, which swam up an open drain into the compound. We tried to fence him in with some tent floorboards but he smashed his way out, and back out to sea at top speed!

At this time the Air Ministry was settling its peacetime establishment of Engineers. The senior, older men were offered permanent commissions, the Air Ministry knowing that in a few years they would all be retiring. To us younger 25-30 year olds they would only offer short service commissions, giving time to sort out whom they wanted to keep. They offered me a short service commission, but back on aircraft, and refused to let me stay in airfield construction. I wanted a workshop's job, so refused the offer and did things my way. I relinquished my War Emergency Commission, came home, had three months' leave, and then rejoined 'in the ranks'. I then changed trades – from aircraft fitter to general engineer – and spent the next 18 years a Warrant Officer in charge of various workshop units, at home and in Germany. I had a 'Mentioned in Despatches' from war service and, in my post war service, had three Commander in Chief's Commendations, with cash awards for technical inventions and an AOC Commendation for Efficiency. To me, that justified the decision I had made regarding my career. I finally retired from the RAF in April 1966 and joined Horncastle RDC as a Clerical Officer.